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THE FALL OF THE SHAH:

U.S. BUREAUCRACIES' BLIND EYE FOR REVOLUTION

Core Course Essay

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Report Documentation Page			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>	
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1. REPORT DATE 1995	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-1995 to 00-00-1995		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Fall of teh Shah: U.S. Bureaucracies' Blind Eye for Revolution			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
			5b. GRANT NUMBER	
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
			5e. TASK NUMBER	
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J. McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT see report				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 11
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified		19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON

THE FALL OF THE SHAH:
U.S. BUREAUCRACIES' BLIND EYE FOR REVOLUTION

The fall of the Shah of Iran in January 1979 represented a complete collapse for U.S. policy in a key area of the Middle East. Top U.S. foreign policy leaders, with their attention focused on other issues, were caught off guard by the revolutionary fervor that swept Iran in the last months of 1978. They had relied on the foreign policy bureaucracies to identify issues needing top-level attention, but for the most part these bureaucracies failed to recognize the depth of Iran's mounting internal crisis. This paper examines the thesis that during 1978 the principal foreign affairs bureaucracies' tendency to conduct "business as usual" diverted them from recognizing the nature of the revolutionary forces the shah was facing.

Reliance on the shah had long been a key feature of U.S. policy.

Since the mid-1950s the United States had relied on the Shah of Iran as a key ally in the Middle East. Under Nixon administration policy, the shah was encouraged to assume the role of a militarily strong regional power, supported by sales of sophisticated U.S. arms, as a counterweight to possible Soviet interests in the area. The shah had helped stabilize world oil prices and had assisted another key U.S. ally in the area, Israel, with oil supplies and shared intelligence. The Carter Administration continued this policy of relying on regional powers, although it also emphasized the need for these powers to liberalize their political systems.

Bureaucratic actors protected traditional agency interests.

During 1978 the key foreign affairs bureaucracies each pursued routine areas of responsibility under the overall policy direction that the shah would continue to be the stable pillar of U.S.-Iranian relations. These key bureaucratic players were the State Department, the Defense Department, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the National Security Council (NSC) staff (principally the National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and his aide Gary Sick).

The State Department, and in particular the U.S. embassy in Tehran headed by U.S. Ambassador William Sullivan, was principally responsible for reporting on the developing political situation. In Washington, the decisionmaking hierarchy ranged from the Iran desk (headed by Henry Precht), to the Assistant Secretary for the Middle East (Harold Saunders), to the Deputy Secretary (Warren Christopher), to the Secretary (Cyrus Vance). Also involved in some decisionmaking at State was the Human Rights Office (headed by Patricia Derian).

The very top levels of Washington leadership, however, were overloaded with higher priority foreign policy activities. The highest priority for Middle East experts was the President's peace initiative for Israel and Egypt, which took months of preparation and negotiation and resulted in the Camp David Accords. In addition, normalization of relations with China and the ongoing SALT negotiations were consuming the full attention of top policymakers. Top policymakers were not initiating a new vision for U.S. policy for Iran, and so the foreign policy bureaucracies carried on their usual routines.

Ambassador Sullivan was not an experienced observer of Iran, having arrived there in 1977 from previous postings in Southeast Asia, and was given no particular encouragement to report on dissident activity. Rather, the ambassador focused embassy reporting on topics of immediate relevance to Washington policymakers - in particular, the shah's political and economic liberalization efforts and the ongoing negotiations over the shah's long list of requested military purchases. Political liberalization had been a long term U.S. objective for Iran and had become of particular interest to the Carter administration with its new human rights emphasis. And some progress could be cited in this area during the first year in terms of the reduced use of torture and number of political prisoners.¹ The shah's military shopping list had generated fierce controversy within the Carter administration, and Ambassador Sullivan had devoted much time to handling this sensitive subject.²

No Carter Administration studies had focused on Iran,³ and Sullivan was expected to continue the existing U.S. policy of relying on regional powers to pursue U.S. interests and preserving the stability of the shah as a key U.S. ally. Dissident activity in Iran had been a feature of the political scene since the 1950s and had been perceived by U.S. policymakers as largely irrelevant.⁴ The January 1978 religious rioting in Qom and the resulting police violence was entirely overlooked in embassy reporting at the time, although this event was later recognized as the point when the revolution

¹Gary Sick, All Fall Down, (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 21.

²William H. Sullivan, Mission To Iran, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), p. 148.

³Gary Sick, Op. Cit., p. 28.

⁴Ibid., p. 37.

began in earnest.⁵

Iran's internal difficulties in early 1978 were not seen as necessary or acceptable topics of discussion. Secretary Vance visited Iran on March 30, 1978, for a CENTO foreign ministers meeting, and neither the shah nor Vance raised the subject of Iran's domestic politics. When Ambassador Sullivan arrived in Washington on July 5 during his extended summer home leave, his discussions with National Security Advisor Brzezinski focused almost exclusively on the immediate bilateral issue of U.S. arms sales to Iran.⁶

While newspaper reports frequently mentioned dissident activity, the State Department bureaucracy tended to give much greater credence to embassy reporting. The ambassador's performance at his July meetings gave the National Security Council staff the impression that the ambassador was well-informed and confident about the shah's ability to deal with internal disturbances.⁷

During the first half of the year, the State Department Human Rights Office had raised some issues regarding the shah's domestic policies and had recommended denial of a routine sale of tear gas and crowd control equipment. Other government agencies involved in considering this sale, however, had come to expect this type of reaction from the Human Rights Office. These other agencies, having broader institutional interests in U.S.-Iranian policy, all approved the sale to proceed on schedule.

The Defense Department's interests in Iran focused heavily on major U.S. arms sales to Iran, including the sale of sophisticated AWACs, as well as

⁵ Ibid., p. 40.

⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

⁷ Ibid., p. 54.

sales of crowd control equipment to the Iranian police and military. During the summer of 1978 DOD policymakers found their time almost entirely consumed by the intense congressional debate surrounding the sale of AWACs to Iran. This debate served to divert the attention of both Congress and the Defense Department away from Iran's domestic turmoil.

The Secretary of Energy, James Schlesinger, who could be expected to seek influence over U.S.-Iran policy, had also been preoccupied during the summer of 1978, due to Congressional debate over controversial energy legislation and the Secretary's proposed trip to China. In any case, Schlesinger was known to be a strong supporter of the shah as a key ally in stabilizing oil prices.

The CIA had been discouraged by the shah from making contact with Iranian dissidents and had an overriding interest in maintaining its irreplaceable electronic listening posts in Iran which monitored Soviet missile and space activities.³ The CIA presented no reporting to alert Washington policymakers to any intensifying crisis. Indeed, an August 1978 CIA study concluded that "Iran is not in a revolutionary or even a prerevolutionary situation."⁴ It was only in November that Washington policymakers became aware that the CIA had virtually no contacts with dissidents in Iran.

On only one important occasion before November did President Carter become directly involved with Iran's internal turmoil. This was in early September when the shah's troops fired into the midst of a religious rally in

³James A. Bill, The Eagle and the Lion, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 254.

⁴Gary Sick, Op. Cit., p. 107.

Tehran's Jaleh Square, killing at least 100 demonstrators. On September 10, President Carter, with the approval of both Vance and Brzezinski, called the shah to make public his continuing support and to bolster the shah's confidence. This action was interpreted by the moderates in Iran as signifying Carter's approval of the massacre and probably proved counterproductive to later U.S. efforts to relate to moderate groups in Iran.¹⁰

As Iran's internal crisis intensified during the fall, State Department efforts focused on incremental changes in U.S. policy and avoided any statements or actions that might cause the shah to doubt U.S. support. More pessimistic points of view were not seriously considered. For example, the Iran desk at State, Henry Precht, was among the first to conclude that the shah was unlikely to survive and actively opposed the U.S. policy of declaratory support for the shah; but because this viewpoint was so far out of line, Secretary Vance disassociated himself from this view and limited the desk's involvement in top level policymaking.¹¹

When Ambassador Sullivan sent his "thinking the unthinkable" cable on November 9, shocking Washington with the possibility that the shah might not survive, no Washington leader was willing to prepare for such an eventuality by approving contact with Khomeini representatives. Rather, Washington policymakers mobilized to consider ways to encourage the shah to broaden his government coalition and thus deflect some revolutionary fervor. The State Department's mission, of course, has been to seek diplomatic and political solutions to U.S. foreign policy problems, and Secretary Vance was among the

¹⁰James A. Bill, Op. Cit., p. 360.

¹¹Gary Sick, Op. Cit., p. 83.

last to admit that such solutions were nonexistent and that the shah would have to leave Iran.¹²

The National Security Advisor, Brzezinski, and his key assistant for Iran, Gary Sick, did not become actively involved in the developing crisis until early November, although they had participated in interagency decisionmaking on arms sales during the summer. Once Ambassador Sullivan cabled Washington on November 1 with an alert that the shah was thinking of abdicating and for the first time asked for Washington's guidance, Brzezinski quickly convened a meeting for November 2 of the NSC Special Coordinating Committee, which he chaired. It was only at this point that the bureaucracies had to frame some decision options for top leaders.

Caution and ambiguity characterized decisionmaking.

Top-level U.S. policy discussions did not produce any clear U.S. policy in early November. When the shah called President Carter on November 3, the President's guidance, according to Vance was that "we could not attempt to tell the shah how to deal with his own internal political problems, but we stressed our confidence in the shah's judgment about the composition of a new government and assured him we would back whatever decision he made."¹³

By November 9 Ambassador Sullivan had sent his cable contemplating the unthinkable - that the shah might not survive - but he did not propose any recommendations, and his suggestion that Khomeini might prove a benign

¹²James A. Bill, Op. Cit., p. 248.

¹³Cyrus Vance, Hard Choices, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 328.

"Ghandhi-like figure" was not convincing to Washington.¹⁴ It appears that, once Sullivan mentioned this possibility, his views tended to be discounted in Washington, because the overriding concern of Carter, Vance, and Brzezinski was to assure that the shah survive politically.

The absence of clear options from the bureaucracies prompted several Washington-led initiatives to go outside the bureaucracy for advice. On November 9, Brzezinski asked a U.S. businessman in Iran to meet with the shah to help assess the situation. In mid-November former diplomat George Ball was brought in to consult with a variety of experts on Iran and provide an independent assessment of the Iranian situation. Brzezinski established an independent communications channel with the Iranian ambassador in Washington, Ardeshir Zahedi, and sought to visit Iran.¹⁵

Top policy leaders, however, could come up with no clearer options than the bureaucracies. The bottom line, until late December, was to support the shah in whatever actions he chose to remain in power. Ambassador Sullivan stated that, other than this general line, he received no specific policy guidance from Washington.¹⁶ George Ball's recommendations included a seriously reduced role for the shah and the opening of disavowable communications channels with Khomeini representatives - both options unacceptable to Carter. U.S. leaders sought to avoid directing the shah's decisions; they did not want to expressly approve the "iron fist" approach of having the military crush the dissenters, but they did not rule out this approach if the shah felt it would work. By late December clear divisions in

¹⁴Gary Sick, Op. Cit., p. 95.

¹⁵Cyrus Vance, Op. Cit., P. 328.

¹⁶William H. Sullivan, Op. Cit., p. 191.

recommendations emerged between Vance and Brzezinski, with Vance still seeking to find an acceptable coalition that would let the shah remain and with Brzezinski ready to urge the Iranian military, if necessary without the shah, to assume full control and crush the dissidents. The shah, apparently earlier than any U.S. leader, saw the impossibility of saving the monarchy and was unwilling to initiate the bloodshed of the "iron fist" approach.

Conclusion

The bureaucracies were indeed slow to identify the increasing revolutionary momentum in Iran, at least partly because they clung to traditional policy assumptions and institutional interests. Dissident complaints and disturbances had long been a feature of the Iranian political scene, and the shah had survived earlier troubles. The overriding policy line of support for the shah as a reliable regional ally was so ingrained that any questioning of his survivability might be considered negative behavior. The standard approach to handling domestic discontent -- recommending political and economic liberalization and broadening the government -- fit well with Carter administration policies. The U.S. foreign policy system searched for points of negotiation and incremental change and did not contemplate such a massive shock as the popular revolution in Iran.

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